

East to West Yatra – Spiritual Growth



BY DIPTI SHAH, CM – DETROIT



In Hindu culture, undertaking a yatra begins with a personal mindset, company of like minded people, preferably sadhus, a willingness to overcome hurdles with not only a smile, but to acknowledge them as opportunities to grow spiritually, and to broaden horizons of knowledge of the gods and saints. Personally, I wanted to achieve all of the above... and our East to West yatra provided all these opportunities.

Our yatra, started on Oct 4, when we reached Kolkata. That same evening, we were fortunate to visit Chinmaya Mission center, Kolkata where our dear Swami Ishwarananda started his life as a renunciate. His memories of the place were full of warm insights. Our resolve for the yatra was tested on that day with blazing hot temperatures followed by a rainy evening and a barefoot walk to the center in about 4 inches of ground water.

Bengal

The next morning, began with visit to **Belur Math** which showcased intricate architectural details and included symbols of multiple religions in their buildings. The samadhis of SharadaDevi and Swami Vivekananda were places of reverence. Later that day, we went to Dakshineswar temple. The darshan of Kali Mata, was an extraordinary event for me since, I have read and heard stories about Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, attaining realization in the presence of the same deity. The visit to the room of Sri Ramakrishna was also a special treat, since that is where young Narain first met Sri Ramakrishna, in his quest for “seeing God”, and also it was where the “Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna” took place. Later that day, a visit to the **Kalighat** temple was adventurous (because of the crowds), but rewarding. The visit to the Birla temple, pointed out the obvious contrast of a modern day temple, which was privately well managed compared to the others.



Orissa

On Oct.6 morning, we flew to Bhubaneswar, and took a bus to **Lingaraja** temple. The temple’s age dating from 6th to the 11th centuries was impressive. Equally impressive was the concept of coexistence in the sanctum sanctorum of Lords Vishnu and Shiva which were both svayambhu. No wonder the place is called the “Lingraja”, the King of the Lingams. A sunrise visit the next day to the Puri beach, a short walking distance from our hotel, began with an explanation of *Hiranmayena Patrena* by Swamiji. The highlight for the day was at the **Jagannath Puri** temple and the history and mythological stories surrounding the temple. After standing in long lines, the darshan was an “adventure for the fittest”. In the midst of chaos was a sense of satisfaction for the eyes and the soul. We then reached **Konark**, the most magnificent of Sun Temples on the face of the earth before 1568, when the main sanctum was destroyed. Looking at the remains, one’s imagination takes off to visualize the brilliant Sun God, on a beautiful huge chariot, with 24 huge wheels, pulled by handsome horses.

Jharkhand and Bihar

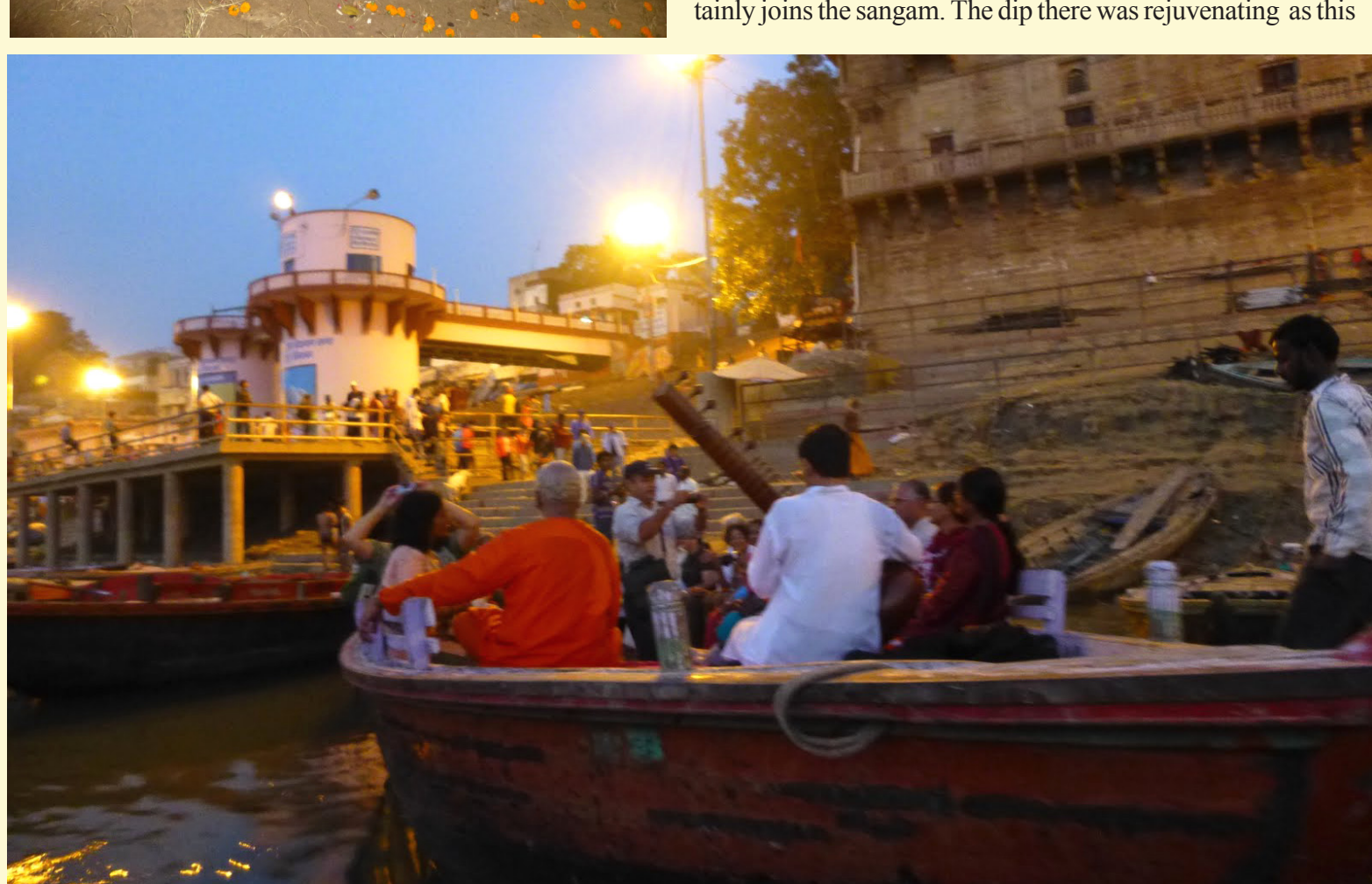
After flying back to Kolkata we started our long drive to **Deogarh**, the city of the Gods. Following morning we left by foot to get darshan of the famous Baidyanath Temple, one of the 12 Jyothirlingas. The stories of the role of Ravana in bringing the Lingam to this place and healing by Shiva of Ravana’s sacrificed head were of significant interest. Again, thousands of pilgrims flocked to this temple, due to the faith associated with the temple, and made all of us all the more determined to get darshan. We then drove to **Bodhgaya** and directly went to the Bodhi tree, and the temple of Buddha that is built there. The history of that place, in addition to the struggle of Siddhartha to achieve Self Realization, feels so real when you are at this place. We were fortunate to get a chance to meditate as a group approximately 10 feet from the Bodhi tree. Next morning, Oct 10, while some of our yatriis were doing the much coveted Pind Daan in **Gaya** during shraadh time, some of us had the good fortune to walk with Swamiji to the Bodhi tree again, and this time it looked different to me in the morning sun.



Uttar Pradesh

That afternoon we continued our journey to **Varanasi** and the next morning at 5 am drove to reach the famous Kashi ghats, and boarded the boats for a sunrise boat ride in mother Ganga. We felt like children running up to mother in the morning to get into her lap. On the boat, we were treated to live classical music on sitar, oh what a treat! Next stop was **Sarnath**, the place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon. King Ashoka also was instrumental in building a lot of structures including the famous Ashok Chakra, India’s national emblem, which is very carefully housed in a museum nearby. In the same museum, is also a statue of Buddha with a perfectly captivating smile and half opened eyes, the looks of a Realized Being.

We then proceeded to **Allahabad**. On Oct 11, early morning we drove to the banks of the Jamuna river and soon reached the meeting point where it was easy to see the sangam of slowly flowing greenish Yamuna with fast moving brownish current of Mother Ganga. Saraswati is supposed to be hidden and certainly joins the sangam. The dip there was rejuvenating as this



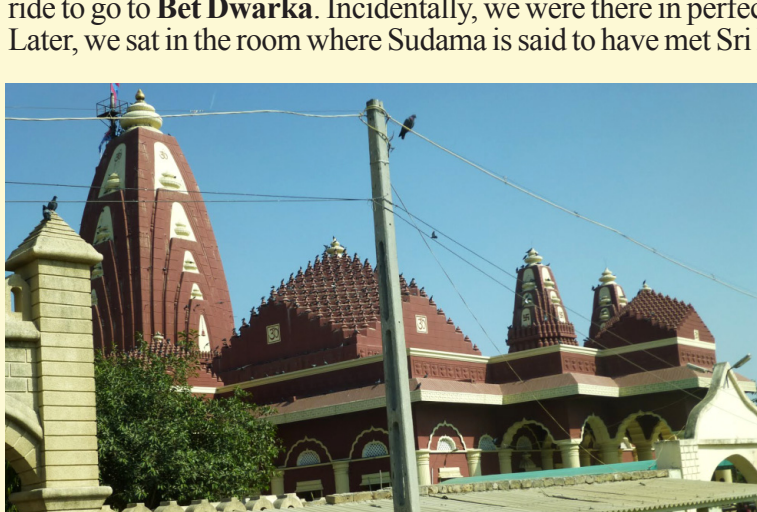
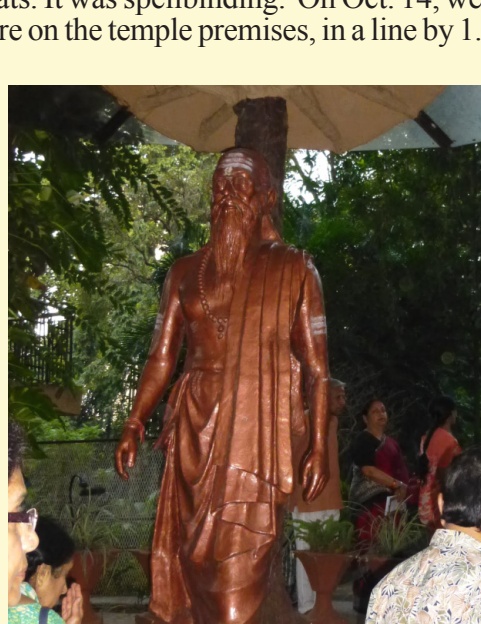
historical spot has its vibrations and a satisfaction of performing a dip, where lots of saints have performed rituals, paid homage to the place and taken a dip over many centuries. Next morning we took the buses to Varanasi, and soon after the hotel check in, we proceeded towards the Ganga ghats and we boarded the cycle rickshaws to take us close to the ghats. It was the first experience of its kind for some of our American friends. At the banks of the river we proceeded to take a dip in Mother Ganga, followed by a sunset boat ride. A session of meditation on the boat, close to the opposite shore of the river, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, was indeed rewarding. Later we viewed the famous Ganga Aarti from the boats. It was spellbinding. On Oct. 14, we woke up soon after midnight to get ready and met in the hotel lobby at 1. 15 am, and were on the temple premises, in a line by 1. 45 am, singing bhajans while awaiting much coveted darshan of **Kashi Vishwanath**. At about 2.30 am we were able to take our place by the door of the sanctum and were able to witness the 16 step puja of the Lord.

Maharashtra

Later that morning, we boarded the flight to Mumbai. We reached **Sandeepany Sadhanalaya** at Powai just after lunch. After a quick shower, we were taken on a tour of the ashram. Gurudev’s kutiya and Jagdeeshwara temple were my favorite spots, in addition to the book store. At the kutiya of Gurudev, one could feel His presence at His desk and in the satsang room. Soon it was time for the arati at the Jagdeeshwara temple followed by bhajans by the current students of the brahmchari training course and satsang with swamiji.

Gujarat

Next morning, we boarded the flight to Jamnagar and drove to Dwarka. Our hotel was right at the beach and at a short walking distance to the **Dwarkadhish** temple, and also the spot where the Gomati river meets the ocean, beautiful indeed! That same evening we got together for the evening darshan and arati at the Dwarkadhish temple. Few of us woke up early on morning of Oct 16th, to take a quiet meditative seaside walk in the dark, followed by meditation on the seashore. Later, we got on the bus and a boat ride to go to **Bet Dwarka**. Incidentally, we were there in perfect time for midday arati. Later, we sat in the room where Sudama is said to have met Sri Krishna. We sang some

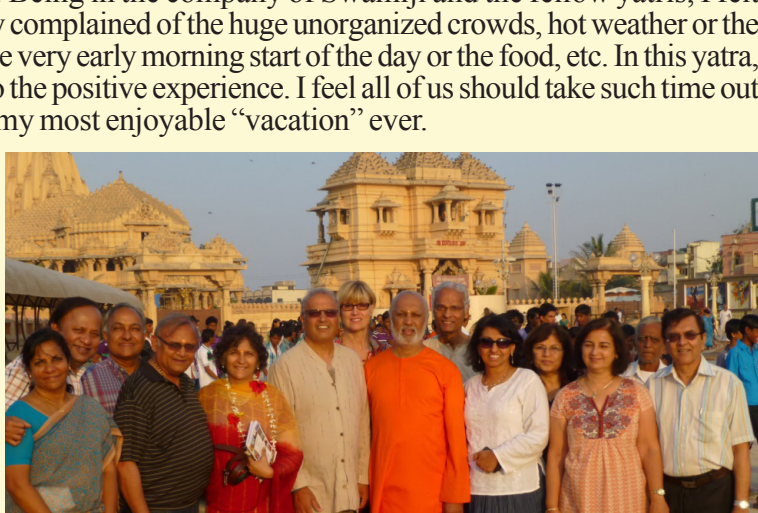
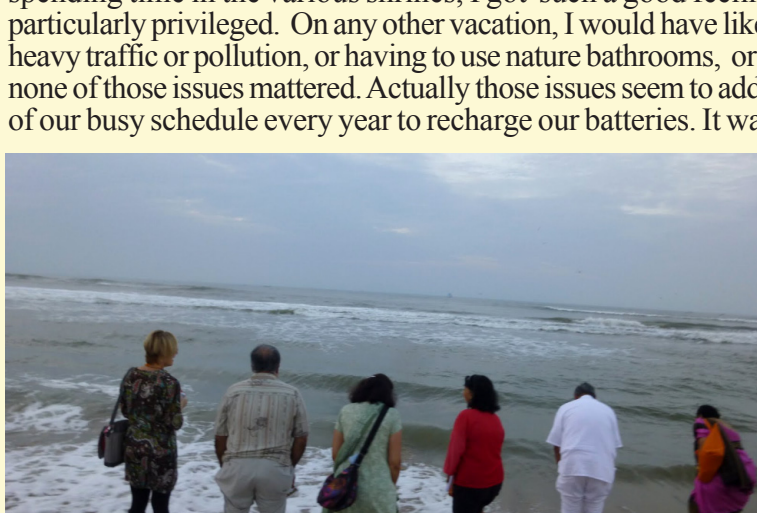


bhajans and chanted verses and made donations to the meals of the Brahmins. We then drove to temple of **Nageshwar**, one of the 12 Jyotirlingas. Most of us were able to do puja to the lingam without being rushed. On the way to Somnath area, we visited **Prabhash Teertham**, a place where Lord Krishna got hurt in His foot by the arrow of a hunter.

In the evening we set out for **Somnath** darshan. The lingam was beautifully decorated and we were fortunate to attend the arati. A beautiful feature at the Somnath temple was the 3D representation of all the 12 Jyotirlingas, with their stories. We all sat down for a “Sight and Sound” presentation which transported us through historical times of the different periods as related to the Somnath temple. Oct 18, the last day of yatra was also eventful. We started early from the hotel to witness the early puja and decoration of the Somnath lingam. Also the little walk on the temple premises, with the gentle ocean winds was an unforgettable experience. On the temple premises, was a Baan Stambh, (arrow pillar) which is the first point on the Indian landmass on the south to the north pole on that particular longitude. The nearest land towards south pole is 9,936 km away. This gives proof of the great ancient Indian wisdom.

We then drove to Rajkot airport where the group proceeded to catch flights to Mumbai and then to the US.

So! Did we meet the goals of the yatra? Personally for me, I feel I accomplished some mileage on the spiritual path. When spending time in the various shrines, I got such a good feeling. Being in the company of Swamiji and the fellow yatriis, I felt particularly privileged. On any other vacation, I would have likely complained of the huge unorganized crowds, hot weather or the heavy traffic or pollution, or having to use nature bathrooms, or the very early morning start of the day or the food, etc. In this yatra, none of those issues mattered. Actually those issues seem to add to the positive experience. I feel all of us should take such time out of our busy schedule every year to recharge our batteries. It was my most enjoyable “vacation” ever.



Please send articles and pictures for publication to Nimmi Raghunathan: nimmicmla@gmail.com

Many thanks to Rashmin Paleja for organizing the tour and Shashi Acharya for coordinating the yatra: All pictures courtesy of Lalet and Sadhna Sharma